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There is power in a union!

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7th February 2004

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An article on anarchism and unions, written in an attempt to build support for the **Anarchist Workers Network** (AWN).

The AWN aimed to create a libertarian presence in the trade unions, but after a period of interest it disappeared.

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years May Day march and organise a “red and black” bloc for the London trade union organised one.

Ultimately, what we do depends on who gets involved and what they want to do. If no one gets involved, the AWN will not exist. It is as simple as that. If you are interested in getting involved then please contact us. We have a world to win!

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and using libertarian tactics. This is the aim of the **Anarchists Workers Network**.

What now?

All revolutionary anarchists support the ideas of workplace organisation and struggle, of direct action, of solidarity and so on. Some anarchists, however, refuse to call these workplace organisations “unions” and instead call them “workers’ councils” or “strike committees.” The name does not matter, the principles are the same. The key difference dividing some anarchists (mostly, but not exclusively, anarcho-syndicalists) from others (mostly anarcho-communists) is on whether such rank-and-file managed bodies should become permanent organisations or not. However, this is a question that is best left to a future date when libertarian ideas have become better known and practised within the class struggle. We are far from being in a position when such a debate will have relevance.

What we should be concentrating on now is working together and spreading basic anarchist ideas amongst our fellow workers, unionised or not. This is the rationale of the AWN. It aims to group anarchists who want to influence the class struggle together. It does not aim to become a new federation (SolFed or the AF). Rather it seeks to complement those bodies and be a tool to co-ordinate activity of all anarchists interested in workplace struggle. We aim to give a focus around which anarchists can work together within their unions, for example, to raise anarchist ideas of workers’ autonomy and direct action.

The AWN has just started. We produced a poster supporting the posties wildcats last year. We are leafleting the Convention of the Trade Union Left to show that there is an alternative to supporting would-be politicians with our dues. We have produced articles for Freedom. We aim to do a leaflet for this

to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organisations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation.”

The role of anarchists as anarchists is essential. The nature of the current unions proves Malatesta when he argued that *“all movements founded on material and immediate interests (and a mass working class movement cannot be founded on anything else), if the ferment, the drive and the unremitting efforts of men [and women] of ideas struggling and making sacrifices for an ideal future are lacking, tend to adapt themselves to circumstances, foster a conservative spirit, and fear of change in those who manage to improve their conditions, and often end up by creating new privileged classes and serving to support and consolidate the system one would want to destroy.”* Thus *“the Trade Unions are, by their very nature reformist and never revolutionary. The revolutionary spirit must be introduced, developed and maintained by the constant actions of revolutionaries who work from within their ranks as well as from outside, but it cannot be the normal, natural definition of the Trade Unions function.”*

We need to think about how we can work within the labour movement (at the rank and file level, of course) is essential to gain influence for anarchist ideas, just as working with unorganised workers is also important. It means rejecting the “one size fits all” approach on the trades unions that has become sadly dominant in certain parts of our movement. When sensible we should be working with the rank and file of the labour movement while keeping our own identity as anarchists and organising as anarchists. In other cases, it may make more sense to form a branch of the **Industrial Workers of the World** (for example) or create an informal grouping like the **McDonalds’ Workers Resistance**. No matter the actual concrete activity, we should be working with the rank and file and trying to create autonomous workplace organisations, independent of the trade union bureaucracy and organised in a libertarian way

The current period is marked by an increase in workers’ anger and action. Trade unions have started to reassert themselves. Strikes, while increasing, are nowhere near the levels of 20 and 30 years ago. However, it is still early days. What happens next depends on what direction trade union militants decide to take.

Currently, the various parties of the left, led by the SWP in England/Wales and the SSP in Scotland, are trying to get the more militant unions to break their financial links to New Labour. Anarchists cannot help but agree. Why fund your oppressors? Yet while agreeing on this, we radically object to the suggestion that unions should tie themselves to a new, “more leftwing,” party. To do so will simply repeat the mistakes of the last 100 years when the union bureaucracies created the Labour party.

Instead anarchists argue that the unions should be independent from all political parties. They should use their members contributions not to fund a new set of would-be politicians but rather to campaign for their members’ interests directly. We suggest far more than just this. Anarchists argue that the labour movement is currently deeply flawed and that is the source of many of our current problems. Moreover, we have a practical alternative which would make politicians irrelevant.

However, given how distorted the anarchist position on unions are, it is necessary to first recap the general anarchist position on the workers’ movement.

Anarchism and trade unionism

For anarchists, there is power in a union. Anarchists have long seen the importance of workers organising themselves. As Max Stirner pointed out the *“labourers have the most enormous power in their hands, and, if they once become thoroughly conscious of it and used it, nothing could withstand them; they*

would only have to stop labour, regard the product of labour as theirs, and enjoy it. This is the sense of the labour disturbances which show themselves here and there.” The question is how best to organise and use it.

For Bakunin, like all revolutionary anarchists, there is, “between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, an irreconcilable antagonism which results inevitably from their respective stations in life.” He stressed “war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is unavoidable” and would only end with the “abolition of the bourgeoisie as a distinct class.” Collective struggle is the key. Strikes, for example, are “the beginnings of the social war of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie ... Strikes are a valuable instrument from two points of view. Firstly, they electrify the masses ... awaken in them the feeling of the deep antagonism which exists between their interests and those of the bourgeoisie ... secondly they help immensely to provoke and establish between the workers of all trades, localities and countries the consciousness and very fact of solidarity: a twofold action ... which tends to constitute directly the new world of the proletariat, opposing it almost in an absolute way to the bourgeois world.” They train workers for the social revolution as they “create, organise, and form a workers’ army, an army which is bound to break down the power of the bourgeoisie and the State, and lay the ground for a new world.” The working class had “but a single path, that of emancipation through practical action which meant “workers’ solidarity in their struggle against the bosses” by “trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds.”

Kropotkin built upon Bakunin’s arguments and, like him, based his politics on collective working class struggle and organisation. For Kropotkin “the syndicalist and trade union movements, which permit the workingmen to realise their solidarity and to feel the community of their interests better than any election, prepare the way for these [anarchist] conceptions.” His support for anarchist participation in the labour movement was strong, considering it a key method of preparing for a

“organisation of the trade sections,” Bakunin argued, “their federation in the International, and their representation by Chambers of Labour, ... [allow] the workers ... [to] combin[e] theory and practice ... [and] bear in themselves the living germs of the social order, which is to replace the bourgeois world. They are creating not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself.” Such workers’ collective organisation and struggle were essential, as Kropotkin also stressed. To free humanity “a decisive blow will have to be administered to private property: from the beginning, the workers will have to proceed to take over all social wealth so as to put it into common ownership. This revolution can only be carried out by the workers themselves.” The “great mass of workers will not only have to constitute itself outside the bourgeoisie ... it will have to take action of its own during the period which will precede the revolution ... and this sort of action can only be carried out when a strong workers’ organisation exists.”

Getting there...

Clearly such a movement does not exist and it will not appear overnight. It will require anarchists to work together to spread our ideas to our fellow workers. It will require, as Kropotkin put it, “Revolutionary Anarchist Communist propaganda within the Labour Unions.” Like Bakunin, he stressed that “the Anarchists have always advised taking an active part in those workers’ organisations which carry on the direct struggle of Labour against Capital and its protector — the State.” This was because such struggle, “better than any other indirect means, permits the worker to obtain some temporary improvements in the present conditions of work, while it opens his eyes to the evil done by Capitalism and the State that supports it, and wakes up his thoughts concerning the possibility of organising consumption, production, and exchange without the intervention of the capitalist and the State.” Anarchists “have endeavoured

Don't vote, organise!

Over a hundred years of left-wing participation in electioneering has proven anarchism correct. Rather than push the struggle for socialism forward, it has simply gutted it of any real radical practice and theory. Instead of constructive organisation and struggle at the grassroots, energy and resources are wasted trying to elect politicians who will not betray us or the ideals of socialism. Sometimes the parties involved do not even need to get elected for this to happen. The current shenanigans of the SWP in regards to the "Respect" proposal comes as no surprise. With socialist principles and class politics happily forgotten for the chance to sell some more papers and get a few comrades elected, the question surely is how long will the rank and file members who have some principles remain within it?

Instead of the dead-end of electioneering, socialists should be stressing working class self-activity and control over the class struggle. Workers, Bakunin argued, must "*count no longer on anyone but yourselves... Abstain from all participation in bourgeois Radicalism and organise outside of it the forces of the proletariat. The bases of this organisation are already completely given: they are the workshops and the federation of workshops, the creation of fighting funds, instruments of struggle against the bourgeoisie, and their federation, not only national, but international.*" The British labour movement has still to learn this.

Such direct action had a politicising effect far stronger than any election campaign. It was, to quote Bakunin again, only "*through practice and collective experience ... [and] the progressive expansion and development of the economic struggle [that] will bring [the worker] more to recognise his [or her] true enemies: the privileged classes ...and the State, which exists only to safeguard all the privileges of those classes.*"

Moreover, as well as undermining capitalist normalcy, workers' organisations also create the framework of socialism. The

revolution and spreading anarchist ideas amongst the working classes. As he put it: "*The syndicat is absolutely necessary. It is the sole force of the workers which continues the direct struggle against capital without turning to parliamentarism.*"

This, for Kropotkin, was part of a general revolutionary strategy. In order "*to make the revolution, the mass of workers will have to organise themselves. Resistance and the strike are excellent means of organisation for doing this.*" He argued that it was "*a question of organising societies of resistance for all trades in each town, of creating resistance funds against the exploiters, of giving more solidarity to the workers' organisations of each town and of putting them in contact with those of other towns, of federating them ... Workers' solidarity must no longer be an empty word by practised each day between all trades and all nations.*"

The current unions

Anarchists have little time for the way the current trades unions are organised and act. They are bureaucratic and top-down. Berkman just pointed out the obvious, when he wrote that the "*rank and file have little say. They have delegated their power to leaders, and these have become the boss... Once you do that, the power you have delegated will be used against you and your interests every time.*" The unions are hopelessly sectionalist. While we have one boss, we are divided into many different unions. The members of one union often cross the picket lines of their fellow workers simply because they go on strike at different times. They do the bosses job for us by dividing our forces. Assuming, of course, the union bureaucracy actually decides to support effective action rather than giving up at the first hurdle.

So, for anarchists, the unions waste the only real power we, as workers, have — our economic power, our ability to use direct action to defend and further our interests where we work

and are exploited. For these reasons we argue for a different form of workplace organisation, one run by and for its members.

Workers Self-organisation

The key issue for anarchists is one of power: who has it. Are the rank and file in charge of their own struggles or is power concentrated in a few hands at the top? Anarchists want workplace organisations which are run directly by their members. This anarchist opposition to union bureaucracy dates back over a century. As does how anarchists think trade unionists should combat it.

Talking about the Geneva unions, Bakunin noted that the construction workers' section *"simply left all decision-making to their committees ... In this manner power gravitated to the committees, and by a species of fiction characteristic of all governments the committees substituted their own will and their own ideas for that of the membership."* In opposition to this, he urged what would now be called a "rank and file movement" to combat the bureaucracy. The workers *"could only defend their rights and their autonomy in only one way: the workers called general membership meetings. Nothing arouses the antipathy of the committees more than these popular assemblies... In these great meetings of the sections, the items on the agenda was amply discussed and the most progressive opinion prevailed."*

This is the key to anarchism in the workplace — the active participation of members in their organisations, of strikers in their strikes. It is the basis of building a rank-and-file movement inside and outside the current trade unions, one which aims to empower the worker at the expense of the boss and the bureaucrat.

From the bottom-up

This shows how anarchists think the labour movement should be organised, from the bottom-up. The basis of the union should be the mass meeting of workers assembled at their place of work. This meeting elects its factory committee and delegates. It is for the workers affected to decision when and what kind of action to take, not distant bureaucrats. To co-ordinate common struggles, anarchists advocate federalism. The workplace union is federated to all other such committees in the locality, each locality federates and so upwards. This promotes class solidarity. In addition, unions within the same industry federate together. The IT workplace is affiliated to a district IT federation. In district federation is affiliated to the national federation.

The decision making process flows from the union meeting upwards. The committees are not vested with power to abuse. The members of union committees should not be representatives like MPs who air their own views and ignore the people. Rather they are delegates who carry the message of the workers who elect them. If they try to tell the workers what to do, then they are replaced as every delegates is subject to instant recall by the persons who elected them. Rather than being highly paid, the aim would be for as few as possible to receive wages as delegates and if they do then it should be the average wage of the workers at the base of the union.

Thus the anarchist vision is for a fighting workplace organisation where the members control the organisation – not the bureaucrats controlling the members. In a trade union the higher up the pyramid a person is the more power they wield; in a real union the higher they are the less power they have.